

BEYOND ELT CHALLENGES AND PRACTICES IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This paper attempts to provide insight views in English Language Teaching practices in Thailand. Given the understanding of educational system, later it is engaging a brief overview of challenge in English Language Teaching. This paper is to explore teachers' understanding of the students-centered approach and their actual classroom practices in Thai schools. It is also grounded concepts and practices of ICT. This paper may adopt some practices or features in Thailand context that might be implemented in Indonesia where these two countries; Indonesian and Thailand share similarity in educational system.

Key words: Challenge, ELT, ICT, Reform, Students-centered.

INTRODUCTION

Thailand is formerly known as *Siam*. Located in Southeast Asia, the official language of Thailand is *Thai*. Even though the idea of making Thailand as a bilingual country (Thai and English) has been proposed, it has never materialized due to the concept of national stability. Education in Thailand relies on Buddhist views which believe in learning for learning-sake – there is no teaching, it is the student's mind which is most important.

The education system in Thailand is similar to the education system in Indonesia in term of the length of compulsory education and the way they are organized. The education system is divided into three divisions, namely: formal education, vocational and technical education and informal education. The formal education system consists of basic education and higher education. Basic education is divided into six years of elementary education and six years of secondary education, the latter being further divided into three years of lower- and upper-secondary levels. Under the National Education Act, these 12 years of education is guaranteed to all Thai citizens.

Similarly, Indonesia has also launched a 12-year compulsory education program starting from 2013 to Indonesian people. Kindergarten levels of pre-elementary education, also part of the basic education level, span 2–3 years depending on the locale, are variably provided and are not compulsory. Another formal education system comprises: a vocational certificate programs, short courses of vocational school programs and interest group program. Non-formal education is also supported by the state. Independent schools contribute significantly to the general education infrastructure.

The government education policy makers has put a lot of effort in ELT where Foreign language (English) includes in one of the eight core subjects. State schools, private schools and public schools should design formal English language education in their institution. English is used in wide range of domains. It is noted that the impact of ELT as a compulsory subject is due to the understanding it as a global language. A possible explanation of ELT features in Thailand for sure was attributed to long time ago story in the Reign of Rama III (1824-1851) where it was begun by Protestant-missionaries who introduced English to this country. During this time, only members of the royal family and nobilities learned the language. Specifically, as a part of curriculum, English was firstly announced in 1921 as a mandatory subject for students beyond Grade 4 in the national curriculum and starting from 1996, it becomes compulsory subjects for all primary school children up to grade 12, a greater emphasizes beyond academic purposes applied.

Historically, education in Thailand which developed from a traditional form had greater change into Western concept of schooling. Foremost, traditional ways of learning which is religious-based linked to social change and modernization of the country. English language teaching plays an important role from time to time since it was introduced. It also leads to educational system. This continuing role keeps in practice till today.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THAILAND

English is a medium of intercultural communication in Asia. This increasingly significant role can be seen through the frequent communication in English with

foreigner for Thais. English as a foreign language largely has been used in trading, business, and tourism as well as in education. This depth penetration confirms the expanding Englishes in the world.

The problematic ELT could be seen through the practices of ELT in teaching. It is known that ELT still adopted teacher-centered rather than students-centered where commonly authority and transmissive are derived by teachers. This traditional activity oriented of course pictured how classroom management and learning process are. The change of teaching approaches is now focus on maximizing learning opportunities to the students.

The low level of English proficiency is believed to come from inadequate teachers' language skills and insufficient teacher education (Nunan, 2003). This critique is addressed to teachers because they are knowledge providers to the students. Critical questions about the needs, the benefits, the users and the change that can contribute by English teachers are required and will provide ideal opportunity to change their viewpoints practices.

Teachers were not the ones who have to blame toward the unsuccessful implementation of ELT in Thailand. Kitjaroonchai (2013) presented the teachers' attitudes perceive toward the English language of the primary and lower secondary school teachers in Muak Lek and Wang Muang districts, Saraburi province. He found contradictory respond toward the distributed questionnaire where the majority of the primary and lower secondary school teachers participating in his study rarely used English to communicate with their colleagues or other people in their community due to an unsupportive atmosphere and cultural context. Surprisingly, those teachers claimed that their English proficiency is very good. Further, poor result in ELT in term of teachers' view was caused by students who are shy to speak English. They are not familiar using English in their daily life.

However, two of major problems ELT in Thailand are teachers' insufficient English knowledge and inadequate education technology competence (Wiriyaichitra, 2002). In addition to the lack of qualified teachers, it is widely understood that what is expected from teachers. Teachers are required to teach effectively in challenging

environments and to make effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) in their teaching.

Upon examining the ELT practices as mentioned above, it is clear that the focus of the paper is to view the challenges of implementing the latest policy. Regarding the policy, the strong commitment to improve the English competency are elevating English teaching and learning through student-centered approach and promoting the use of ICT.

ELT Reforms

Thailand has showed positive attitudes regarding ELT in this globalization era. There was a movement towards development which paid more attention and expanded English in Thai Education. Thus, there are a range of opportunities to develop ELT in this country as well. The principle of education reform is the understanding about the statement that education builds the nation, empowers the individual, and generates employment. Four aspects are covered; (1) learning reform, (2) teacher reform, (3) education quality assurance, and (4) reorganizing education system. The first project enhancing English proficiency is learning English through effective teaching called students-centered and the rest is ICT in ELT class. As a starting point, Baker states (2008, p.137) “this curriculum highlighted the importance of English in enabling access to new technology and information via computers and the internet”. These tools offer a wide of ELT sources which can be exploited in the classroom. Again, this policy can provide a foundation for the further exploration of ELT in this country. The two new policies are meant to tackle down this problem and have potential impact on the English Language Skills.

1. Current ELT Pedagogy: Students-Centered Approach

Even students learned English for almost a decade during their study; it does not necessarily granted that their English meet with the standardization of ELT Curriculum in the country. It is reported that Thai's English proficiency is categorized into low comparing to other ASEAN Country. In this case, moving on from teacher-centered to students centered views as the real reform of ELT in Thailand. The

mandate to use students-centered have introduced since 1999. However, during this period it was assumed that this approach would be very influential regarding to English Language Teaching in this country.

Understandably, teacher-centered approach passively engaged students in classroom activities. The teacher dominated to talk and the students had to respect to whatever the teacher said. As a reversal, students-centered allows the students to explore their potential and participate actively where the role of teacher as a facilitator who guide them into learning process. This insight of course must empower English teachers becoming experts in their profession. To achieve this goal, English teachers are offered unlimited chances to improve their teaching competence. This leads us to the second implementation of education reform in Thailand which called students-centered approach. In line with the focus of Thai National Education Act (NEA) of B.E. 2542 (1999) about “a series of educational reforms”, learning process must take into account. However the concept of self-education and long life education are demanded to reach.

The way English is taught and implemented directed to implementation of students-centered approach was studied by Nonkukhetkhong et al (2006). When the approach was applied, the focus of learning comes to develop students’ communicative competence which promoted students’ independent learning in classroom activities. Further, even English teachers shared similarity perspective toward students-centered approach; they established variation in implementing it. Unfortunately, interview and questionnaire proved that the variety of communicative activities still applied in a traditional way.

The emphasis on the value of implementing students-centered approach in ELT was also studied by Naruemon (2015). He found that Thai teachers possessed varying degrees of understanding of the students-centered approach and its application. These teachers had a superficial and fragmented understanding of and some misconceptions about the students-centered approach. They therefore adopted this approach to teaching in a limited fashion during their internship.

There are many reasons for implementing the approach. One and the most important reason is that the students-centered can be used to support the classroom

activities. It more focuses on developing potential skills and ideas that the students have so, interactive classroom activities can be built. In relation to the objective of learning language which is to facilitate communication, we need to explore more about language and exposure to use it through learning language itself. Thus, the use of students-centered approach has to demonstrate students' responsibility in learning by trying to finish assigned tasks. These are more meaningful to the students which enable them to work on their own with less help from the teacher. Researches proved that students-centered are able to do so when they actively engaged in learning process. Specifically, Nicoletti (2015) suggested that English Teachers in Thailand are better positioned to design and facilitate students-centered classrooms when they have a greater understanding of how to apply it.

Unlike the students-centered approach which is able to provide opportunities to speak in the classroom, teacher-centered provides a large chance to teachers to talk during the course. Students are being listeners rather than learners. Research told us only 20% people do remember about what they heard. Then, it is not surprising when we found that the longer the lecture takes place, the less information can be absorbed.

The new learning paradigm, students-centered approach is also known as active learning. This is because through this approach, students do not rely on memorizing only but also delivering their thought and perspectives to peers or class members. Hence, they can take control over learning. It could also be argued that students-centered is best applied in ELT. Another rationale for its use in the classroom is towards a variety of learning activities such as jig saw, think pair shares, etc. Students might gather opportunities to connect the content in real life situation. They might also increase students' retention. In addition, social interaction among students will be improved. These benefits are provided through students-centered approach.

In conclusion, when the students tend to be quiet in the learning process, the classroom condition is much better dominated by students' talks toward the content or material being learned. Student-centered offers an opportunity to become active engaged in classroom activity. In fact, teachers have difficulties in recognizing the approach. As a result, an interaction between a student to another student, a student to a teacher, and a student with others students were not developed as it is expected.

Then, a highly participated student in the learning process which is the major goal of student-centered approach cannot be reached yet.

2. Digital Trends in the Classroom

Thailand has also followed other countries' footsteps regarding to ELT instructional. A paradigm change has occurred in the educational field such as in the form of implementing ICT. This marks the shift from using conventional blackboard to an instructional media using ICT which has become a major issue in education. Generally, this shift becomes one of the trends in global higher education. The substitution of traditional way with a more sophisticated instruction through ICT aim to develop effectively implementation of the first reform, students-centered, which in particular term fail to fit into the goal of ELT. ICT could be one way to make the EFL curriculum more meaningful and locally relevant to Thai students which could result in better language proficiency. A rationale for the use in the EFL classrooms will be briefly discussed later. A description of some beginning steps that ELT professionals in Thai can take to begin to implement a more ICT orientated pedagogy will be elaborated. Both are taken into account as the local problems and issues faced by their students in the classes.

Bureau of International Cooperation (2008) declared that to develop a foreign language in Thai, One Laptop per Child Project (OLPC) is essential. This project aims to promote the intensive use of information technology and to enhance learning efficiency which is focused on increasing the number of computers available throughout the education system in order to bridge the learning gaps for students in rural areas. ELT cannot be considered successful when students do not know the global issues related to information explosion through ICT.

Unfortunately, OLPC project did not affect any improvement in students' performance (Vota, 2011). A possible cause why it is failed is due to teaching system. It is known that educational change is all about changing the teaching system, not the technology. OLPC became a hot debate to be implemented or banned during this time. As it was reported, Thailand says no to OLPC (Vota, 2006). Rather than focus too much on technology and materials, Thailand tend to be focus on substances. An

ambitious project namely One Tablet per Child OTPC then introduced on 7th June 2012. Ironically, both OLPC and OTPC failed to show their promises to be an exciting opportunity in learning outcomes (Viriyapong and Harfield: 2013)

Key issues for implementing ICT in Thailand EFL are insufficient ICT infrastructures, lack of technical supports, insufficient ICT skills, and resistance to change from a traditional paradigm of teaching and learning (Deerajise and Harbon: 2014). Although Thailand policy, financial environments, and administration have promoted infrastructure on ICT, the real problem rises from the teachers' beliefs and attitude. It is known that how to use ICT effectively is a complex process. Teachers still prefer the traditional ways in teaching such as using textbook as the main source of teaching. Lack of ICT knowledge also leads the teachers to have insufficient confidence to run the technological applications.

Previous studies have recognized the influence of ICT in learning and suggested to use it in the classroom environment. ICT blended instruction model produced positive effects on students' English learning achievements, classroom participation and students' attitudes towards learning English (Campbell, 2015). The productive impacts in ELT reassure teachers to accept and implement ICT in the class. Since the government has supported the provision of ICT through OLPC project, teachers must integrate technology into their courses to support students' language competence. Teachers should be encouraged to focus on the quality of their approach (students-centered) and using technology to support students' practices in English. Thus, appropriate integration of technology in the classroom encourages students to use language in many different ways and bring world issues into the classroom.

ICT is potentially a powerful resource for teaching English. Research on technology-based in learning is proven enhance teaching and learning by providing a more authentic and a meaningful learning environment (Noytim, 2006). Other possible contributions of ICT use in EFL classroom teaching and learning as highlighted by Vonganusith and Jeremy (2008) is enhancing teachers for learning effective language and computer skills. In other words, it is no doubt that the integration of computers into language teaching to support the language learning environment as an instructional strategy is needed. Some examples how to apply ICT in ELT classroom

are transformed such as teaching literature through videodiscs, teaching speaking through power point projectors, teaching writing via email and website. E-library materials can also be brought as sources to access reading materials.

Since ICTs are now integral part of technology in the curriculum, teachers and students learning English Language must become proficient in accessing and using electronic resources. The fact that ICTs are indispensable tools that facilitate the teaching and learning of English Language encompasses several devices. Thus, the teachers can manipulate appropriate portions and scenarios on a lesson being taught to facilitate delivery, learning activities as well as evaluation.

IMPLICATION FOR INDONESIA

Since it was introduced, the idea of students-centered has become a trend in contemporary English Language Teaching pedagogic. The transformation and development of teaching language through students- centered approach provide a big portion of ELT change not only in Thailand but also in Indonesia. More autonomy is addressed to the students which assume that they are able to develop the communicative skills and being autonomous during this approach. The issue of education quality which has been concerned for many years is expected to be improved.

The goal of implementing student-centered, of course, is as one of efforts to improve the quality of learning. Similarly, Indonesia in this perspective, also fails to adopt the approach correctly because of cultural assumption stated that teachers are the main source of knowledge (Mokoginta, 2013). To recover this, the very first thing is teachers need to understand the philosophy of this approach. It is urgent for teachers to provide themselves with sufficient understanding about the concept of the approach. In this case, Indonesia is one step a head compares to Thailand in improving the professionalism of their teachers. A teachers' training called MGMP, a forum to well-prepared teachers towards the trends in education launched. MGMP is a professional association-non structural organization established in accordance with guidelines issued by Government Regulation No. 38/1994. Even though the teachers

had already applied the student-centered in their teaching, they are still found to have difficulties in implementing it. Thus, we also need a teacher development program such as seminars and workshops to train them the ways to implement the student-centered successfully in their teaching with the majority of the students were passive during the lessons. Thailand later may propose a similar program to deal with others constraints related to education approaches.

Regarding to ICT implementation, Indonesia also consistently used it in schools even though not as aggressively as Thailand did. We do note that the value of ICT for language teaching is undeniable. In terms of educational institutions, technical provision such as internet connections, projectors , computers, and many more have inserted to support ELT in Indonesia context. Some schools do provide Wi-Fi that allows teachers and students to connect to the Internet or communicate with one another wirelessly within the campus area eventhough the connection can be slow at times in the country. Unlike Thailand, teachers' acceptance of ICT in Indonesia has a special phase. Silvianti and Yusuf (2016) found that Indonesian teachers who do not use ICT in teaching still showed positive perceptions towards the importance of ICT that presumably derived from their personal experience of using the Internet for their personal use. Besides, cost and competence become the major factors which prevented ELT teachers from using ICT. It is necessary for teachers to know how to teach English Language using ICT. Proper training on how to use it is needed.

However, if Indonesian government support sufficient and adequate ICT in schools as Thailand did, every teacher can develop himself to be ICT-users because they already have positive perceptions about it. It will no longer put a lot of efforts for government to prioritized One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) program. Therefore, it is essential for the teachers be well prepared to face new challenges in education and technology that are present today.

In conclusion, the implication of the paper revealed that Indonesia-Thailand may share challenges and solutions that might be applicable in those country. Thus, encouraging the understanding of student-centered pedagogical approaches and ICT applications are required for successful ELT today.

CONCLUSION

This paper represents an initial step toward enhancing understanding of how teachers understand students-centered approach and apply ICT in the classroom. A solution to successful implementation of this approach are understanding the philosophical and psychological foundation and key features of students' centered teaching practices, as well as the underlied principles of ICT features and how to put this approach into practice. It is hoped that this paper can shed light upon the practices in Thailand and come up with practical solution to Indonesian context or vise versa. Indonesia then can be seriously committed to changing and improving the tide of English literacy and so can be Thailand.

BIOPROFILE

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